

5. United States brokers a Gaza peace plan

After two years of brutal fighting, Israel and Hamas agreed in October to a cease-fire. It was the second of the year. The Biden administration negotiated a cease-fire in January that increased humanitarian aid to Gaza, led Hamas to release 33 captives, and prompted Israel to free nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. The respite from the fighting ended in mid-March after the two sides disagreed on the terms of an extension. President Donald Trump played a central role in pushing for the October cease-fire,

with Qatar, Turkey, and Egypt also helping mediate. The agreement laid out a three-phase peace plan for Gaza: 1) an immediate cease-fire with Israeli security forces withdrawing to preset lines and an exchange of captives and prisoners; 2) the demilitarization of Hamas and the dispatch of an international stabilization force to Gaza; and 3) the reconstitution of Palestinian governance and the reconstruction of Gaza. The United States considers phase one completed, though Israel insists that it will not move to

phase two until the last Israeli captive is released. The UN Security Council endorsed the Gaza peace plan in November, authorizing the deployment of the International Stabilization Force and calling for the establishment of a Palestinian Committee to manage Gaza's day-to-day governance. A lasting peace, however, remains elusive. Israel has resumed strikes in Gaza, Hamas shows no signs of disarming, and no country has yet formally committed to contributing troops to the International Stabilization Force.



This picture, taken on December 24, 2025, depicts the aftermath of an Israeli attack on Beit Lahia in Gaza during the cease-fire. ● BASHAR TALEB/AFP

4. War in Ukraine grinds on



Russian soldiers hold a flag in Siviersk, a city in the Donetsk region, Ukraine, on December 11, 2025. ● AP

The war in Ukraine, now in its fourth year, ground on in 2025. Russia intensified its missile and drone campaigns, repeatedly striking Ukrainian cities, causing heavy civilian casualties and damaging major infrastructure. In March, Russia reclaimed its province of Kursk, which Ukraine seized in a surprise invasion in August 2024. Russian advances in Ukraine itself, though, were meager; Russia increased its control of Ukrainian territory by less than 1 percent in 2025. Those gains came at a frightening

cost, with Russia losing roughly 1,000 soldiers every day. Ukraine's losses are far lower, but its population is just a third of Russia's. Ukraine stunned the world in June with Operation Spiderweb, a covert drone strike deep into Russia that hit five air bases. The attack, however, did not change the war's basic dynamics. Experts debate how long Russia and Ukraine can continue fighting, though Ukraine's position looks more precarious. President Donald Trump insists that Kyiv does not "have

the cards" needed to win, and he remains opposed to increasing US support. Europe is providing Kyiv with substantial financial and military support, and the European Union ended 2025 by agreeing to provide Kyiv with a \$105 billion loan. That should cover two-thirds of Ukraine's financial needs over the next two years. Trump is pushing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to accept a cease-fire that many experts see as heavily tilted in Russia's favor. Even so, Russian President Vladimir Putin looks likely to hold out for more.

3. Israel and United States attack Iran's nuclear facilities

Some wars are measured in years, others in days. The June confrontation between Israel and Iran falls in the latter category; it is now known as the 12-Day War. The clash was years in the making. Israel has long seen Iran's nuclear ambitions and its support for anti-Israeli resistance groups across the Middle East as an existential threat. After the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks, Israel targeted Iranian-backed groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. These op-

erations damaged Tehran's ability to use the so-called Axis of Resistance to deter an Israeli attack on Iran. In October 2024, Israeli air strikes hit Iran's missile facilities and air defenses. In June 2025, Israel launched Operation Rising Lion. It involved air strikes on Iranian nuclear and ballistic-missile facilities, as well as on military bases and command nodes, and the assassination of politicians, military leaders, and scientists. Iran retaliated by firing missiles

and drones at Israel. Then, on June 22, US B-2 bombers and Tomahawk missiles hit Iran's nuclear facilities as part of Operation Midnight Hammer. President Donald Trump claimed the attack "totally obliterated" Iran's nuclear program. However, Iran likely dispersed its stockpile of enriched uranium before the bombs fell. Iran agreed to Israel's request for a cease-fire on June 24. That halted the fighting but left the underlying political disputes unresolved.



A projectile hits buildings as the Israeli Iron Dome air defense system fires to intercept missiles over Tel Aviv, on June 13, 2025. ● LEO CORREA/AP

2. China weaponizes rare-earth minerals

Future historians may flag 2025 as the year China established itself as a superpower equal to the United States. For decades, Washington used its economic dominance, particularly in international finance, to advance its foreign policy objectives. In April 2025 and again in October, Beijing showed that it could also weaponize its economic advantages.

In its case, the leverage comes from rare-earth minerals essential to a wide range of industrial and military applications. China has worked for years to dominate the rare-earth supply chain; it now controls roughly 60 percent of the world's rare-earth mining and 90 percent of its refining capacity. China's willingness to weaponize its dominance was no secret. Bei-

jing curtailed rare-earth exports to Japan in 2010 during a territorial dispute over the Senkaku (or Diaoyu) islands. Despite the warning, the United States did little to protect itself. When Trump raised tariffs on China in April, Beijing halted the export of magnets and seven rare earth minerals to the United States. Within a month, Trump scaled back his tariffs. In October, after Trump imposed additional restrictions on the export of advanced semiconductor chips and technology to China, Beijing imposed new regulations on the export of products using Chinese rare earth minerals. Faced with a potentially substantial disruption to the US economy, Trump delayed implementation of his export controls and abandoned several other measures aimed at China. Beijing, in turn, delayed implementation of its October regulations for one year, suggesting that the rare-earth threat continues to hang over the United States.



Soil containing rare earth minerals is prepared for export at a port in Lianyungang, Jiangsu province, China, in October 2025. ● REUTERS

1. Donald Trump disrupts US foreign policy

Is making good on your word always a good thing? Donald Trump vowed in 2024 to overhaul US foreign policy. He can now say, "Promises Made. Promises Kept." His disruptions began even before he took office, when he declared his desire to acquire Greenland, make Canada the 51st state, and reassert control over the Panama Canal. On Inauguration Day, he withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement and the World

Health Organization, restricted refugee readmissions, and designated drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. In his first month in office, he began shuttering the US Agency for International Development, ending independent oversight of major federal agencies, and slashing government payrolls. On April 2, he launched "Liberation Day," imposing 10 percent tariffs on most imports along with additional country-specific tariffs of up

to 50 percent. Trump claimed credit for convincing NATO members to spend 5 percent of their GDP on defense and for ending eight foreign wars. He failed, however, to end the war in Ukraine, and to the surprise of his non-interventionist supporters, he threatened Venezuela with regime change. Earlier this month, he released a National Security Strategy that provided a strategic logic for his actions. Critics found much to fault in what Trump did: his tariffs hurt US consumers and producers, his Ukraine peace plan rewarded Russia, many of the conflicts he claims to have ended continue, and his downsizing of the national security bureaucracy left the US government greatly weakened. One thing, however, has become clear: Trump has ended the era of Pax Americana. That reality brings to mind Joni Mitchell's haunting lyrics: "You don't know what you've got. Till it's gone."



US President Donald Trump announces new tariffs on April 2, 2025. ● MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AP

The article was first published by the Council on Foreign Relations.